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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KCOR](#) [KPAO](#) [NG](#)

SUBJECT: Journalists' Arrests Raise Questions about GON Commitment to Press Freedom Reforms

REF: (a) 06 Niamey 1088
(b) 06 Niamey 865
(c) Niamey 957
(d) Niamey 1346

¶1. (U) On December 5, 2007 two journalists of the private biweekly L'Enqueteur were arrested and held in custody in Niamey. Editor/journalist Ibrahim Souley and owner/journalist Soumana Maiga were detained in response to a libel complaint filed by Niger's Minister of Economy and Finance Mahamane Ali Zeine. The two journalists were released on December 7 and are awaiting a trial date.

¶2. (U) Zeine claimed that articles, which appeared in the November 19 edition of L'Enqueteur and alleged his involvement in illegal grants of public projects and mismanagement of public finances, were untrue and defamatory.

¶3. (U) Under Niger's criminal libel statutes, journalists are subject to arrest and prosecution in criminal court. Use of these laws to intimidate or punish journalists who allege corruption has been a common past practice of GON officials (ref a).

¶4. (U) Legislative reforms aimed at decriminalizing the libel statutes were drafted and submitted to the GON during the previous government of PM Hama Amadou; however, they are currently stalled. The Ministry of Justice must review and affirm the proposed reforms on behalf of the government before they can be submitted to the national assembly for debate and potential passage.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: based on the former PM's previous statements and his own use of criminal libel statutes against media critics (ref b), the GON's sincerity in seeking to enact and implement these reforms has been highly suspect from the beginning. Further, recent GON actions related to the media, including the suspensions of Radio France International (RFI) and Agadez-based private newspaper Air Info (ref c), the arrest and continued detention of Air Info journalist Ibrahim Diallo (ref d) and threats by the head of Niger's media regulatory body against the press (ref d), inspire little hope that these reforms will be enacted any time soon.

ALLEN